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SWP Comment

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Abiy Superstar – Reformer or Revolutionary?

Hope for Transformation in Ethiopia

Annette Weber

It really is quite amazing. In the few weeks since Abiy Ahmed was elected Prime Minister of Ethiopia, nearly all the established facts that underpin Ethiopian politics have started to unravel. The new Prime Minister has apologized to the population for the mistakes of the past, ended the border war with Eritrea without making any demands and dismissed key officials from the old regime. At the same time, he has lifted the state of emergency and liberalized the economy – all this was previously considered unthinkable in Ethiopia. Control, internal security and a close-knit collective of former liberation fighters were the defining elements of a style of politics that provided stability and economic growth for a long time, but neglected the country's rapidly growing young population and its concerns.

When Abiy Ahmed succeeded Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, there was no plan for regime change. Abiy had previously worked in the cyber unit of the intelligence service, INSA, and was a soldier in the war waged against Eritrea between 1998 and 2000. He then enjoyed a stellar career in the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO). After the victory of the liberation movements over the military regime in 1991, OPDO formed a government coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), with three other parties. The coalition was dominated by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) until the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012. When 41-year-old political scientist

Abiy was elected, it was the first time an Oromo had taken power. His family includes Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Evangelicals, Tigray, Amhara and Oromo. This background suggests that Abiy will not pursue ethnonationalist policies.

The beginning of change

Since the end of 2015, tens of thousands have been protesting against the compulsory purchase of land set aside for expanding the capital, Addis Ababa. More than 700 people were killed in the subsequent crackdown and 23,000 arrested. The state of emergency imposed at the time shattered the relationship between the government



and the people. A movement called Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromo (Oromo Youth Movement) became a symbol of protests. Strikes were sometimes controlled via social media, including through bloggers in the diaspora. The government had no adequate response to the protests and tried to reassure people by consulting selected opposition parties. When this had little effect and the protests rekindled, Prime Minister Desalegn ordered the release of a number of political prisoners. He also announced his resignation, saying he intended to make 'room for political change'. However, ethnic conflicts, primarily over land, continue and more than one million people have been displaced so far.

That the Council of the Government Coalition (EPRDF) elected Abiy Ahmed Prime Minister by 108 out of 180 votes was astounding. The Tigray party, which only represents six percent of the population, has largely been controlling the political, economic and military interests of the country since the overthrow of the military regime led by Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. Although the EPRDF is formally composed of parties from all four major regions, a greater degree of participation by the other political parties was inconceivable because the TPLF showed the greatest military might during the liberation struggle and was led by its charismatic and decisive leader, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, until his death in 2012. The TPLF, probably out of a sense of superiority, did not propose any of its own candidates for the position and had no doubt that their preferred former parliamentary speaker, Abadula Gameda, would have the support of both the Oromo and the majority of Amhara and Tigray.

Political upheaval

Prime Minister Abiy has been touring the country since April. In his inaugural address, he acknowledged that the previous government had made mistakes and campaigned for political openness and reconciliation with Eritrea — formerly sacrosanct taboos. Abiy, who wants to engage the

youth, speaks of freedom and the need for political transformation. He released a large number of political prisoners, the opposition exiled abroad has returned for dialogue and violent opposition groups listed as terrorist organizations, such as Ginbot 7, have also been invited to participate in Ethiopia's political process. Abiy has promised a free press, he has lifted Internet blockades and wants to open up the mobile network to foreign providers. Last but not least, he wants to change the constitution to limit the Prime Minister's term of office.

For the first time in Ethiopia's recent history, a transformation is being attempted from within. Since the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, each change of government had been bloody. By contrast, Abiy neither questions the EPRDF nor does he break radically with his predecessors. But the Ethiopian people and the political class not only reacted with incredulous amazement and euphoric optimism. Given Ethiopia's history of armed conflict, there is widespread fear among the population that the pendulum could swing back towards violence. On 23 June, an attack was carried out at a major event for the Prime Minister in Addis Ababa: two people died and 150 were injured. This shows that not everyone is in favour of peaceful change. It is still unclear who was behind the attack. It was not too long ago that an opposition alliance won a large majority of votes in the 2005 elections in the capital and throughout the country. The ruling party reacted to the unexpected outcome of the elections with repression.

At his cabinet reshuffle in mid-May 2018, Abiy removed long-serving and powerful EPRDF officials, which caused some astonishment. The majority of the cabinet now consists of Oromo, the previously influential TPLF remains with only two ministers.

Barely three months after his election, almost all influential actors in the 'deep-state' — the intelligence service, the military and the TPLF-associated economic complex — have been replaced. This can be viewed as a necessary restructuring and as a bold move by the Prime Minister who wants

to garner support particularly from young people, protesters, the opposition and Oromo. This is risky for Abiy but, on the other hand, it represents the promised change that tens of thousands of demonstrators have called for in recent years.

The fact that there has so far been no resistance from the security authorities, the army and the Central Committee, testifies not least to the credibility of the hierarchy and loyalty to the state that has characterized Ethiopia for centuries.

If the old guard does not want to be sidelined, it will have three strategies. Firstly, it could become an advocate of the reforms and hope to regain leading positions in the 2020 elections. Secondly, it could withdraw and allow itself to be celebrated as a pioneer of democratic reform or, thirdly, oppose the movement and try to reinstate the old order through repressive measures – and probably also by force. It would be desirable for the reformers to gain the upper hand. They could then use their experience in government and political infrastructure to secure their political survival in the next elections. However, it is also possible that the EPRDF might implode, should there be fierce infighting between the internal factions.

Next steps

The coming weeks before the EPRDF party conference in August are crucial. If Abiy succeeds in consolidating his power beyond ethnic ties and in integrating opposition groups from home and abroad, Ethiopia could succeed in what has never been achieved in the region by a regime emerging from a liberation movement: simultaneously introducing transformation and generation change.

The next step could be a national dialogue or, less ambitiously, preparations for the next election. In both cases, the opposition will play an important role. The first steps have been taken to bring opposition leaders living abroad back to the country. Lencho Letta, founding member of the

Oromo Liberation Front (OLF, later Oromo Democratic Front – ODF), plans to return after more than 20 years in exile. Many oppositionists, however, do not trust the abrupt turnaround. They remain cautious and have succumbed to the understandable reflex of focussing on criticism of the TPLF.

Even opposition activists who had called for violence, who were imprisoned as terrorists or denounced as such, have been released during the amnesties of recent weeks. They are allowed to remain politically active as long as they renounce violence.

Economic policy: more of the same but quicker

The population of Ethiopia, more than 100 million people, lives mainly in rural areas and practices subsistence farming. Abiy Ahmed backing the potential for change among young people. However, economic renewal was not invented by the new Prime Minister. Under Meles Zenawi, the developing state – a mix of revolutionary democracy and planned economy – prevailed; infrastructure development and economic liberalization began under Hailemariam Desalegn. In this regard, Abiy policies are more continuity than turnaround, but he is achieving a much higher hit rate.

Nevertheless, the liberalization of the economy has by no means been just a success story. The industrial parks, where companies such as H&M, Primark, Tchibo and KiK produce their goods, were attacked during the protests. The anger was largely aimed at the country's nationalization: The affected regions have little say in major agricultural projects or urban expansion. The construction of the GERD dam to electrify the region beyond Ethiopia, the railway line from the Red Sea to the economic zone near the capital, industrialization and the establishment of textile companies are generating average economic growth of ten percent. Whether it can keep up with demographic trends is by no means certain.

Abiy is committed to the privatization of the profitable Ethiopian Airlines, as well as

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the infrastructure, telecommunications and energy sectors. Despite economic success, there is insufficient foreign currency. The International Monetary Fund issued a debt warning for Ethiopia in 2018. Critics fear that liberalization has been too rapid and that privatization will only bring about short-term gains and long-term corruption problems. The United Arab Emirates has just granted a loan of 3 billion US dollars including a direct injection in the central bank of one billion US dollars — a win for Abiy.

Return to orderly power

In addition to opening up the interior of the country, the Prime Minister's decision to withdraw from occupied territories in neighbouring Eritrea represents a precipitous U-turn that no Prime Minister has previously dared to pursue. The war between Eritrea and Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000 killed more than 70,000 soldiers on both sides. The embattled border town of Badme has been occupied by Ethiopian troops since the Treaty of Algiers in 2000 and an arbitration award recognizing Eritrea. Not everyone has welcomed the government's official statement to adhere to the Algiers agreement. But this implementation earned international recognition. The fact that Eritrean's President sent a delegation to Addis Ababa for consultations and that the Prime Minister is planning a visit to Asmara can already be considered a great success for the new Prime Minister's policy. Furthermore, Abiy Ahmed is trying to rebuild Ethiopia into a regional regulatory power through regional consultations and negotiations with the Gulf States. Orderly power of this nature is absolutely necessary because the situation in the region is tense with the conflict over the Nile, the militarization of the Red Sea and the ongoing conflicts in Somalia and South Sudan.

Implosion or transformation

Whether the young, dynamic Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed can succeed in creating jobs with a complete revolution and in bringing about the freedom and regional relaxation hoped for will become clear in the coming months. Uniting a divided country without upsetting the political class is a Herculean task.

Abiy was able to replace the old vocabulary of revolutionary democracy with a new narrative of awakening and participation. Whether he can translate this into political practice depends on three factors: the willingness of the population to support the political transformation without being guided by the particular interests of ethno-nationalists; the will of the political opposition to constructively participate in shaping the political arena, for example through elections; and last but not least, the willingness of the political class to place the interests and well-being of the country ahead of retaining power for themselves.

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